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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001637

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)  
SUBJECT: LEBANON: SEEMINGLY HEALTHY PATRIARCH STILL WORKING  
ON CHRISTIAN RECONCILIATION

REF: BEIRUT 1228

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Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) Maronite Patriarch Sfeir, in a November 13 meeting with the Ambassador, expressed measured optimism that the Maronite League's continuing efforts to reconcile Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and Marada party leader Suleiman Franjeh will be successful. Praising President Michel Sleiman's "middle of the road" stance, Sfeir said that nevertheless Lebanon is still plagued by Syrian intervention. Meanwhile, rumors are circulating that the Vatican is looking to replace Sfeir in the next few months. End summary.

RECONCILIATION  
IS A NECESSITY

2. (C) On November 13, the Ambassador, accompanied by PolOff, visited Maronite Patriarch Nasrallah Boutros Sfeir in Bkirke. The Patriarch expressed his disappointment that efforts to reconcile Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and Marada party leader Suleiman Franjeh have been unsuccessful to date. Franjeh, he said, is "well-fortified" in his stance against Geagea (dating back to his accusation that Geagea was responsible for the death of his parents and sister during the civil war), and this is infecting the entire Christian community. He lamented that while both the Sunni and Shia communities suffer from internal divisions, the Christian tension has received particularly widespread attention.

3. (C) Sfeir, who spent most of October in Rome attending the General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, reported that the Vatican is trying to help Lebanon, but does not occupy itself with Lebanese daily affairs. He noted that the Maronite League is still working on facilitating intra-Christian reconciliation. Expressing measured optimism, Sfeir said that ultimately reconciliation depended on the will of Lebanon's "intervening neighbors." The Patriarch concluded, "National reconciliation is a necessity."

SYRIA ALWAYS INTERVENING

14. (C) Believing that the Syrians will not facilitate border cooperation or the exchange of diplomatic relations with Lebanon, the Patriarch said flatly, "Syria is always intervening to the detriment of Lebanese interests." Nevertheless, he described the Maronite Church's relationship with Syrian Maronites as positive, adding that the Maronite bishops in Aleppo and Damascus travel frequently to Lebanon for joint meetings. According to the Patriarch, the Maronite community is quickly dwindling in Syria as more Christians are moving abroad.

SITUATION TODAY IS BETTER  
THAN ONE YEAR AGO

15. (C) Praising President Michel Sleiman for maintaining a good balance and walking "in the middle," Sfeir assessed that the situation in Lebanon is better than it was one year ago. He speculated that the spring 2009 parliamentary elections may not occur on time, but stressed that Sleiman was working to maintain dialogue between the coalitions.

VATICAN TO REPLACE  
PATRIARCH?

16. (C) Separately, Sheikh Michel Khoury conided to Pol/Econ Chief and Senior LES Political Advisor on November 13 that he expects the Vatican will work to replace the Patriarch within three months. Khoury said that Vatican officials determined

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that Sfeir, during his October trip, was becoming senile. The Vatican might ask Sfeir to resign or appoint a guardian until elections are held to replace him, Khoury relayed.

17. (C) Khoury said that he personally preferred Youssef Bishara as the next patriarch, but other candidates such as Boulos Mattar, Samir Mazloun, and Bishara Rai remain serious contenders. Khoury said he believes the Vatican could bypass the church's procedural elections (reftel) and appoint a patriarch, but that the Pope does not want to create problems within the Eastern Catholic churches.

18. (C) A contact at the Egyptian Embassy echoed Khoury's remarks, but implied that the Vatican may use Sfeir's health as a cover, when it is actually disappointed with the Patriarch's inability to reconcile the Christians. According to the Egyptian diplomat, any change in leadership would not occur until after the parliamentary elections.

COMMENT

19. (C) The Patriarch appeared to have the same level of energy we have always witnessed. While the Vatican does play a role in the patriarch succession and bishops' selection in Lebanon, it does not seem plausible that it would actively seek to replace a sitting patriarch. End comment.  
SISON